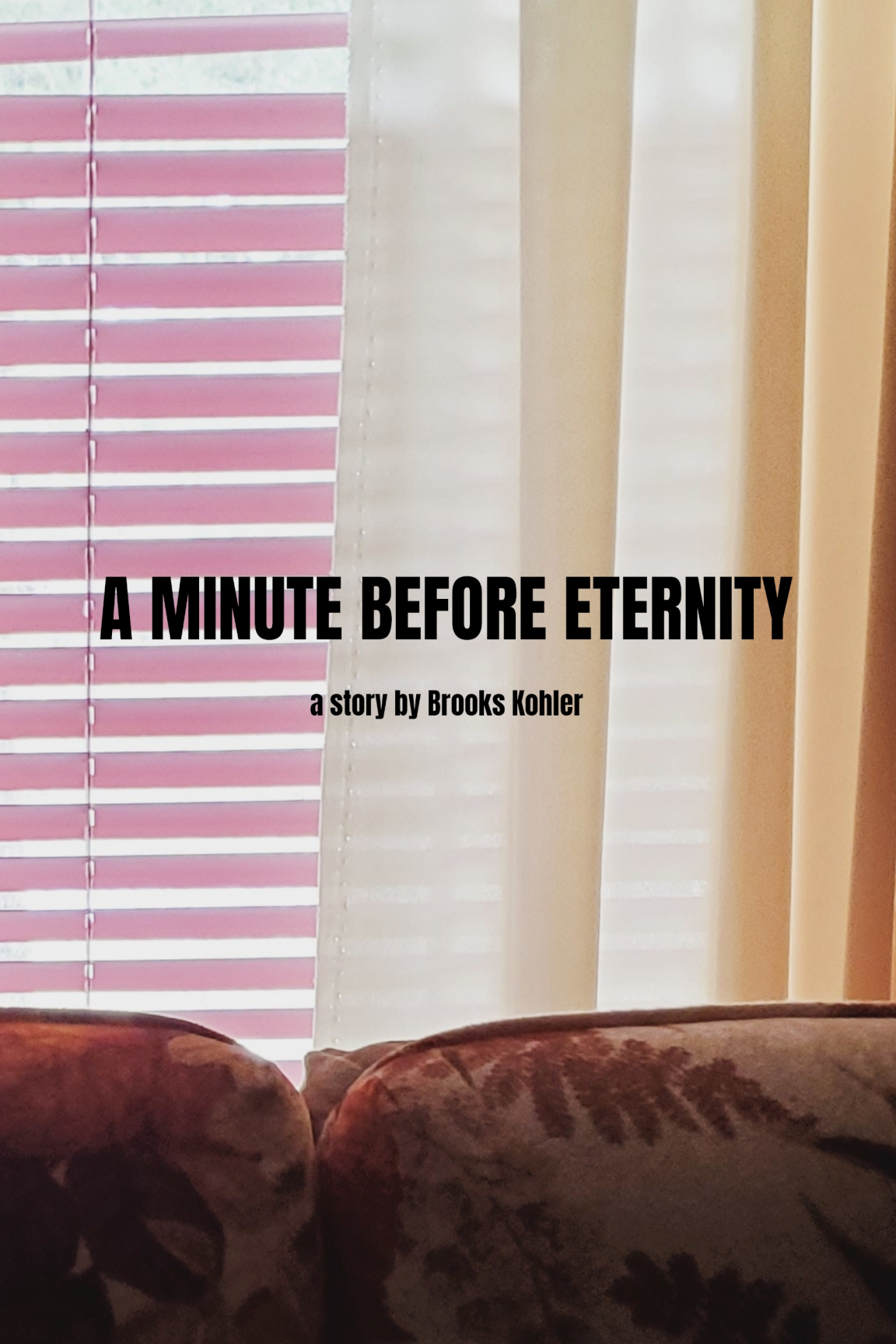


A MINUTE BEFORE ETERNITY

a story by Brooks Kohler

Ned placed his cold and wrinkled hand on the side of the tree. As he pulled his fingers across the rough contour, he smiled. It had been years since he had climbed the hill to get to the tree. He was afraid he couldn't. Even as a boy, he had found the climb difficult, but now with aching legs and a walk that wasn't steady, the thought itself caused him to want to lie down. Yet, he was dragged back to that place, deep into the night from dreams that seemed as real as yesterday.

While in the comfort of sleep, he saw the tree, the hillside, the woods, and the creek that ran at the base. In those dreams he visited with friends, people he hadn't seen in years, smiling and laughing as they did when they were younger, but unlike his daily life, he still remembered them. The disease which blocked his memories, forcing him to constantly decode faces of familiarity, had not yet touched that most important part of his soul, the part that housed what once was.

Looking at the tree, a tear came to his eye, caused by his memories of a set of initials carved long ago. The scarring, as wide as his thumb, only reminded him of his age, but it was a good feeling, one that he savored as he

did his first kiss, or his first glass of French wine he had tried during the war. Nothing could take this moment away from him, not his doctors, not his overprotective children, nor the world around him which viewed him as a relic from the ancient past.

Using his foot, he kicked away the leaves near the tree's roots, making a nest to sit in. The ground was moist, and he chuckled as it brought back a memory of the little one-room schoolhouse he had attended as a boy. He remembered how mad Miss Swanson was when he wet his breeches. At the time, there was nothing funny about the incident, and for a moment, but only a brief moment, he felt the pain of ridicule. Soon, however, as fast as the emotion came, it left, and he couldn't help but laugh at what had happened at his tender age.

"Ned!" shouted Miss Swanson. "What on earth have you done?"

"He peed in his breeches!" exclaimed Maggie Hill.

"Hush, Maggie! Keep your mouth shut! Do you want everyone to..."

Frustrated, the woman raised a ruler high into the air and slammed it down hard onto her desk. Knowing

the familiar sound of wood to table, all the class took notice. "Why didn't you raise your hand, Ned?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied, in earnest.

The room around him burst into laughter. Miss Swanson turned her anger on the children who were now squirming about as if a snake had entered the building. "Stop that laughing!" she ordered. "I said, 'Stop-it-right-now!'"

As he reflected on the childhood memory, it dawned on him how sincere the wisdom of a child can be. Adults argue, but a child will give you an honest answer, one you're not expecting to hear.

Ned had experienced this phenomena with his own child. When his daughter Nicole was no more than three years old, she somehow managed to lift his coffee cup from the table and proceeded to pour the scalding contents onto his lap. Reading the paper at the time, the sensation caught him by surprise. Resorting to a cussing and screaming fit, he was quickly reprimanded by his blue-eyed angel, Nicole, who said in a calm voice, "Poppy, you shoozn't say tat."

Discovered by his wife, who heard the commotion from a back room, he soon learned that he should have taken his daughter's advice; he spent the evening on the couch and the rest of the week eating cold lunch meat.

Perhaps it was the clean air of the woods, or the pills his doctor had prescribed, finally working for the first time, but regardless, he felt alive, more alive than he had in years. The doctors, in their infinite wisdom, hadn't given him long to live. Yet, sitting there, he couldn't help but feel as though he was cheating them out of their degrees.

"What do they know?" he asked himself. *"For all they know, I could live to be a hundred."* The thought was optimistic, but there was a time in his life when the thought of turning twenty-five seemed distant. That was something the doctors didn't know.

He didn't talk much about the war, not even to his family. Too much had happened for him to give all the details. Besides, how could he explain to people the sound of bombs dropping, the seconds of silence that would follow, and then the agonizing torment of hearing a boy scream for his mother?

"How long do you think he's going to do that?" asked a wide-eyed nineteen-year-old, sitting across from him in the foxhole. "I mean, how long do you think he's going to scream like that?"

"Don't know," he replied. "Sometimes they do it all night. Depends on how bad they've been..."

"Hey, new guy," interrupted another, overhearing the conversation, "shut your mouth! What do ya think this is? Happy hour?"

"How-how-how did you know I was new?" he said, stuttering.

"Only a new guy would ask a stupid thing like that!" the man replied. "You wanna know when he'll be done?"

"Yes."

"He'll be done when he's done!"

The man ended his reply by waving his hand in the air as if he were sending a long distance slap from his corner of the foxhole. For consolation, the boy looked around for support, but no one dared say anything. In the end, all he could do was tuck his head and cry.

It was memories like this one, memories of innocence stolen by the war, that Ned hated most. A day

could be perfect, the sky blue from one horizon to the next, and then the clouds would come. Like a flash of lightening, he'd see them: their lifeless faces peering up at him, their mouths open, and oftentimes their eyes still holding the same gaze as the moment their life was snuffed out like the cherry of a stogy.

Shaking it off, he took a deep breath, and the pounding instigated in his chest slowly fell back into the erratic, skipping rhythm he had acquired with age. Nothing hurt more than what he could not tell, and this would be another day he would pass again on telling once more.

Putting aside what he could not change, he closed his eyes and let his mind wander back to the happier times before the bombs, the screams, and the friends he had lost. The meditation took only a few minutes before he felt at peace, calm enough that he could sleep, or enjoy a moment alone with himself without feeling as if he had to be doing something. This moment of tranquility, however, was short-lived when, from out of nowhere, he heard a young girl's voice.

"What do you think you're doing, Ned?"

"What?" he asked, surprised to hear his name.

Opening his eyes, he saw her, the sun making a silhouette of her body. As she moved closer, his mind scanned for images to explain who this person could be. Then it hit him. And when it did, he began to kick, as if flames lapped at his feet.

"Oh, you silly thing," she said, grinning. "Quit playing around! We've got to get going." Kneeling down beside him, she began to rub his head, but when she did, he jerked. Noticing he was frightened, she tried to console him. "Shoo! Shoo! Calm down, Neddy. You're okay. Just let me have a look-see."

Finding a sore spot near the base of his neck, she moistened her index finger with a kiss and rubbed the wound. The act instantly brought a tear to his eye. It had been so long since he had felt her touch. He thought he had forgotten it.

"Oh, Neddy," she continued, "you did hurt your head, didn't you?" Taking her free hand, she wiped away his tear. "Don't worry," she reassured, winking. "I won't tell anyone." Pausing for a moment, she studied his face. It was pale and somewhat clammy. "Ned, are you're okay?"

"I'm fine," he replied, "but it can't be you!" His emotions switched from yearning to anger. "I don't know who you are, young lady, but whoever is putting you up to this is sick! Sick in the head! Is one of my kids in on this?"

Still concerned about his condition, she placed her hand on his shoulder. "Ned, what are you saying?" she asked.

"That's what I thought," he said, interrupting. "I bet Jerry put you up to this. Where are you, Jerry? You can come out now for your...!"

"That's it, Ned! I'm taking you home. I don't know who Jerry is, and with the way you're acting, you wouldn't know him from Adam!"

Taking him by the arm, she helped him to his feet. He looked back at the tree. Something was different, out of place. He couldn't tell what it was at first, but then he discovered it – the initials. They were fresh.

Shocked, he looked to her for confirmation.

"Pauline?"

"Well, at least you know who I am," she said, chuckling. "Come on, Tarzan. Let's get you home to put

some ice on that noggin of yours."

"But, I don't understand!"

"Don't you remember the fall?" she asked.

"Fall? What fall?"

She pointed to the broken branch dangling from above. "That fall, Ned. Now, come on. Quit horsing around!"

"But wait! Pauline, you're..." His words fell apart, like the memories he could barely piece together.

"I'm what Ned? Spit it out!"

"You're dead. You've been dead for twenty-two years."

Shifting her head to the side, she leaned in close, saying, "Let me test you on that."

Pulling him near, she circled his nose with her own. Her breath was so sweet he wanted to eat it. When their lips finally met, a tingle shot down his leg and exited his toes.

"Stop! Stop!" he shouted, pushing her away. "This isn't happening! I'm an old man! You're a young lady! You can't be who I think you are!"

"Old man?" she questioned, laughing. "My pa

always said you were eighteen going on forty, Ned, but I didn't think you believed it. That fall must have really knocked you out of your wits."

"Eighteen? But, I'm not..."

Beginning to think he was crazy, he reached for his bottle of pills he had stuffed into his coat pocket for such emergencies. However, as he searched for the opening to the pocket, he became worried when he couldn't find it. Looking down to the place where it should be, he lost his balance and stumbled backward. Reaching out for him, she grabbed his left arm and held him steady.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

He wanted to answer but couldn't. Everything had changed. Where once there was a pocket, there was now a thin, flannel shirt, and where once there were blue jeans, there was now a thick pair of coveralls. What was even more extraordinary were his hands. They were young and smooth, not wrinkled and weatherworn. Frightened, he took hold of the tree and sat back down.

"Are you going to throw up, Ned?"

"No," he replied, tucking his head. "I'm fine. Just let me sit here for awhile."

Dropping to her knees, she scooted in close and once again started to nurse him, checking his head for other bumps or bruises she may have missed, and his skin for a fever. This went on for almost a minute when he decided to face the reality of what might be happening.

"Are you really her?" he asked, his upper lip quivering with nervousness.

"Who, Ned?"

"Are you really Pauline Mitchell?"

"No," she said, sarcastically, "I'm Claudette Colbert, and you're Clark Gable."

Instantly, time appeared to slow down. The revered silence of the woods became amplified. Colors became brighter. The crackle of stretching timber, the chatter of a browntail squirrel, and the rustling in the undergrowth of a creature not seen came enthusiastically to his ear. Lifting his hand, he touched her face. In response, she pressed his hand firmly to her cheek. A moment in time passed between them, a secret moment meant to be savored.

"Pauline," he whispered, "I thought I'd never see

you again."

With those words she placed her fingers against his lips, "Shoo, Neddy. Just enjoy it," she said.

There is an unspoken bond between lovers that goes deeper than life itself, and the same love that helps forge that sacred bond is so powerful it transcends all logic. Although he didn't understand what was happening, it felt good to see her and know she was near. Not a day had gone without his thinking of her. And despite the fights and the rough times, it was the little things he dwelt upon, the little things that he missed most about her.

How many times he had longed for one more kiss on the shoulder when walking in from work. How many nights he had lain there in bed alone, on the brink of insanity, simply wanting to smell the perfume that she wore with leisure. It was an ache and hurt that never seemed to completely go away. Death is a fact of life, but he was not prepared for the lonesome, hollowed out feeling of losing Pauline to cancer.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

More worried than before, Pauline quickly stood

up. Ned did nothing but give her a stare as if he were a child wanting someone to carry him.

"Ned, take my arm. We're going home."

He reached out for her and together they left the tree and made their way down the side of the hill. Along the way, Ned stopped to take a drink from a nearby creek. While he squatted and sipped nature's cool, clear nectar, Pauline slipped off her shoes and began wading downstream, silently doing circles as if she were a body in orbit. She loved the creek and always had. The world could be falling apart, but Pauline Mitchell would save herself by going to the creek. For her, it was more than a place to swim or fish. The creek was a refuge.

Lost in the soothing sensation of the water around her ankles, she never realized he was watching her attentively. Nor, did he give her any reason to think he was. He simply let her play out the fantasy that was brewing in her mind, while at the same time, he was creating a fantasy for himself.

Suddenly, without warning, all went bright. A sharp pain at the back of his head forced him to lunge forward, headfirst into the water.

"Ned!" screamed Pauline.

Quickly, she ran to his aid, her feet being sliced on broken glass and sharp rocks as she ran. Struggling, she pulled and tugged on his limp body, until finally she managed to drag him out of the water and onto the bank. His skin was now paler than before. Putting her head near his mouth, she listened for breathing, but heard nothing.

"Oh, God! This isn't happening," she said, trying to assure herself that everything would be okay. "Come on, Neddy! Come on. Wake up! Wake up!" Gently, she patted his cheeks, but nothing happened. Again she listened for breathing, but still no sound could be heard. "Come on, Ned. Come on. Don't do this! Don't do this! You're going to be fine! You can't..."

Her voice evaporated. Frustrated and scared, she gathered her thoughts. She realized what she had to do; she had to let his folks know. Maybe somebody could do something. Slipping on her shoes, she sped off across the soybean field that separated the woods from Ned's home.

Seeing the house in sight, she began yelling frantically. A black and tan hound began yelping, as if it were on the hunt. The sound made her even more

nervous, but she pressed on. Yet, to her surprise, nobody came to greet her. The yard and surrounding landscape were vacant of any semblance of life. She stomped up the front steps and banged loudly on the door until it opened.

"Yes, Doctor?" asked an anxious, young woman, still holding the handle of the door.

The waiting room fell calm upon his entry. Everyone straightened up and began putting away their magazines and items that made it all seem normal. A child, playing in the corner, was lifted onto its mother's lap. A man, holding an unlit cigarette, took a final drink of coffee and then tossed the cup into a nearby trash can.

Rising from her chair, a middle-aged woman came forward.

"Doctor, is my father...?"

With a sincerity in his eyes, he placed his hand on her shoulder, cutting her off before she could finish. "I'm sorry, Nicole," he said, softly. "We couldn't save him."

THE END

"A Minute Before Eternity" by Brooks Kohler. (Published by Brooks Kohler in 2022 for the purpose of adding the story to the Internet Archive. Originally published in 2004 by *Senior Views*, a magazine based in Anna, Illinois.)

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.